



### *“Speaking in the vocabulary of a post-Christian world”*

*“We live at a time of major conflict in the church. Millions of Christians are embracing an emerging way of seeing Christianity’s heart. Millions of other Christians continue to embrace an earlier version of Christianity, often insistently defending it as “traditional” Christianity and as the only legitimate way of being Christian.” ... “The earlier paradigm has nourished and continues to nourish lives of deep devotion, faith, and love. ... For millions, especially in North America and Europe, the earlier paradigm has become an obstacle.”*

Marcus Borg, **The Heart of Christianity**. 2003

*“... my hope is to demonstrate that this Christianity of the future is still in touch with the experience that propelled this faith-tradition into being more than two thousand years ago. ... I write only to issue an invitation to come and listen, to explore these possibilities, and to see if by travelling on a new road we can enter the reality of the God beyond theism and hear the voice of Christ speaking in the vocabulary of a post-Christian world.”*

John Shelby Spong, **A New Christianity for a New Age**. 2001

The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria was formed in 2006 to provide opportunities for people to explore meeting points between the Christian tradition and contemporary knowledge and society. We consciously linked into the world-wide progressive Christianity ‘movement’. Over the years the case for changes in how we understand traditional Christianity has grown stronger. However, the implications for personal living, facing tough times and disasters, and involvement in action for a more compassionate and just society have not been as strongly formulated. Or perhaps we have not expressed the implications in ways that are authentically and motivationally “ours”. In coming months PCNV will focus on these aspects of being progressive Christians. See the last page.

### **“New ways of what it means to be religious”**

“... while the modern world is sounding the death-knell of traditional religious forms, it is at the same time heralding new ways of what it means to be religious. Religious thought and endeavour must now fasten attention upon this world, rather than upon the other-worldly goals. ... In the new cultural age, we are becoming aware of the fact that we are all humans, irrespective of our class or race or gender or religion or age.”

Lloyd Geering

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## “1.6 Billion Ways to be Muslim”



A well-attended meeting on 19 March heard Reem Sweid, founder and President of Muslims for Progressive Values Australia, provide an informative and interesting introduction to being Muslim today. She combined her personal story of living in an almost bewildering number of different countries and cultures with insights into contemporary Islam.

Her personal story hit home when she said that prejudices about Muslims are everywhere. “Because of stereotypical ‘boxes’ many people don’t think that I am a real Muslim”. “We all need to look outside the box of our own religion and ask what we expect the religion of others to be.”

Asked about opposition she has encountered, she said that the biggest opposition to conservative Islam comes not from Muslims but from anti-Muslim bigots.

An interesting description of problems in translating and interpreting the Qu’ran reminded Christians of the ways the Bible has been translated and interpreted to suit dominant groups. Reem stated that Islam has never been one monolithic thought system.

A very moving part of Reem’s address was her response to a question about what being a Muslim meant in her life. She spoke of the pattern of praying, the insights into what is possible for her from the discipline of fasting every day during Ramadan, and the teachings of the Qu’ran about life and death.

The organisation she founded and represented wants to encourage humankind to look beyond differences to commonalities.

The website of Muslims for Progressive Values provides information about MPV:

“OUR MISSION is to embody and be an effective voice of the traditional Qu’ranic ideals of human dignity, egalitarianism, compassion and social justice.”

“OUR VISION ... envisions Islam and an Islamic community that embodies the ten principles of MPV.

MPV envisions a future where Islam is understood as a source of dignity, justice, compassion and love for all humanity and the world.”

See the statement on the website of the ten principles that guide Muslims for Progressive Values: [www.mpv-australia.org](http://www.mpv-australia.org)

*Report by David Merritt*

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## The search for spirituality beyond organised religion

Hugh Mackay’s book, *Beyond Belief*, is known to many PCNV members following his address at a PCNV meeting in 2016.

He argues that while our attachment to a traditional idea of God may be waning, our desire for a life of meaning remains as strong as ever. In his social research on Australian culture, he asks what do people actually mean when they say ‘God’? Around two-thirds of us say we believe in God or some ‘higher power’, but fewer than one in ten Australians attend church weekly.

He says we want to feel connected to something bigger even if we have turned away from traditional religion.

An address on this topic Hugh Mackay delivered in Brisbane last year is available on the internet:

## [Spirituality in a secular age](#)

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### THANK YOU

A special thank you to the many members who responded rapidly to my late notice about renewal of membership in PCNV. I confess I was one of those who had not renewed but I had lots of company!

Support for the organisation is particularly appreciated from members who cannot get to meetings but want to be in touch with progressive ideas and events. I was especially impressed by Barbara, aged 92, who renewed for two years. Keep sparking!  
*David, secretary*

*We share a Report from Queensland. Reproduced with permission.*

## **Formation of the Progressive Christianity Network – Qld.**

In line with long held plans to 'catch up' with other States and have a Queensland Progressive Christianity group, this concept was boosted considerably on Saturday 11th March.

The gathering at the Treston seminar stayed on to discuss a draft proposal prepared by the committee of the **Progressive Spirituality Network**. The plan is to transition the hundreds of members in the latter group into the proposed PCNQ while establishing a close relationship with the ever growing UCFORUM. Of course many of our members belong to both groups. **Paul Inglis** has accepted an invitation to chair the group in the formative stage.

We now also have many international links and are aware of a need to move forward with them in mind. At the same time, as the Common Dreams Conference proved, Queensland has a lot to offer the progressive movement and there will be much about the PCNQ that is distinctly us.

### **What's in a name?**

The name for the group is not yet finalised but we are keen to align and link to interstate groups for several reasons. Feedback at this meeting and emails I am still receiving will help us to make the 'right' decisions.

### **What is the purpose of such a group?**

The scope and purpose of the group is still under discussion, but the following have been mooted:

- to provide a safe place for progressive thinking Christians and others to come together and discuss the many issues in the life journey
- to be an organising group for seminars and conferences
- to continue the work of the former progressive spirituality network
- to build links with non-Christian groups with strong interest in progressive spirituality and religion
- to welcome atheists in the ongoing conversations about the meaning of life
- to work with similar interstate groups when planning visits from keynote speakers
- to publicise events related to our interests
- to make appropriate commentary on contemporary matters
- to explore the growing literature and scholarship in the field.

### **Some proposed initiatives**

The planning team has already begun the process of setting up a **Round Table** group made up of representatives of all progressive and 'explorer' groups and individuals who can informally come together to find common ground and share in initiatives. A draft paper on this proposal is available on request from [Paul](#). Your comments and suggestions are always welcome. We will be considering whether this is part of the brief for the PCNQ.

We want to reach as many interested people across the State as possible and an early challenge will be to find ways to support individuals in isolation from progressive groups. Already we have many members who correspond with us and receive reading lists and other information.

Watch for further developments and please continue to participate in our activities. UCFORUM site: [www.ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au](http://www.ucforum.unitingchurch.org.au)

## Address by John Shelby Spong to the National Conference of the American Humanist Association 2016

They gathered at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in downtown Chicago, some 500 delegates strong. They came from all across the United States and abroad with the Netherlands, in particular, being well represented. By and large they were a well-educated group made up largely of professional people: doctors, lawyers, business leaders and academics. Their single most identifying mark, however, was that they were overtly non-religious – perhaps anti-religious. Their publicity material featured a quotation from Kurt Vonnegut, the late novelist, extolling the virtues of living without God. I had been invited by this organization to receive an award and to address this conference. I shared both of these privileges with one other person. His name was Dr. Jared Diamond, a renowned scientist and former professor at UCLA, who is the author of numerous books. I was to receive the Humanist Association's annual "Religious Liberty Award." Dr. Diamond would be honored as "The Humanist of the Year." Previous winners of this award, I learned, were Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts and novelist Joyce Carol Oates. It was an impressive list.

I found it a fascinating experience to enter this conference, as I did, as a representative of organized religion. Clad in the purple shirt and clerical collar of my profession, my wife and I presented ourselves at the registration desk to receive orientation materials, a schedule of activities, meal tickets and name tags. Above this registration desk was a banner that proclaimed "Good without a God." I felt very much like a Mexican immigrant might feel at a Trump rally!

I thought about that banner's message and I did not disagree with it. I have known and respected atheists whose lives were not only good, but noble. The quality of goodness does not depend on a belief in God. Perhaps what I understand better than that is that the opposite of their slogan can also be true. One can be "evil with God!" I thought of the anti-Semitism that has been the great "contribution" of the Christian Church over the centuries. I recalled that the Crusades were organized by the Vatican to kill "infidels," which was the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries' word for Muslims. I thought of Christianity's complicity with slavery, the "Bible Belt's" support of segregation, the church's denigration of women over the centuries and the abuse of the LGBT community of people by organized religion. Yes, one can be good without a God and one can be evil with one. It is also true that people can be evil without a God and good with one. Having a God or not having a God seems to me to be no guarantee or even an indicator of goodness.

Everyone that I met on a personal level at this conference was incredibly warm and gracious. I saw one person, who had attended lectures I had delivered in a church in Western North Carolina over a number of years. She had always wrestled with what she called the unbelievable aspects of the various religious explanations with which she had grown up. She was absolutely glowing when she greeted me. "I have finally found the community in which I belong," she stated. I was delighted for her. Religion sometimes does strange things to people.

Another delegate greeted me with a lovely smile, then shared with me the fact that the last book she read before deciding that she was no longer "a believer" was my book: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. That book, she said, "pushed me right out of the door of organized religion." An author never knows quite what effect his or her writing will have on his or her reader. It was interesting to me that this woman seemed to say this as a compliment!

I discovered that the reason I had been chosen to receive their "Religious Liberty" award was related to two things. One was the role I had played over the last fifty years in the various battles for justice, as people of color, women and the LGBT community struggled for full acceptance in the life of our church and country. The other was what they perceived to be my attacks on the kind of religious literalism with which most of them grew up and were today in vigorous rebellion against. I found it fascinating how familiar they were with my writing. I have discovered many times that those, who are themselves most overtly anti-religious, are also deeply, sometimes even emotionally interested in the religion they claim to reject. Carl Sagan, who was what I call a "God-intoxicated atheist," fitted that category.

At the banquet during which the awards were given, the two honorees spoke. During my presentation, I walked them through just a bit of contemporary biblical scholarship. The Bible is a human document, written between two and three thousand years ago and it makes assumptions that no one today can still make with any intellectual credibility. The earth is not the center of a three-tiered universe, God does not

live above the sky. Human beings were not created perfect, only to fall into “original sin.” Stories of a virgin birth are not about history. Miracles, people need to recognize, do not enter the story of Jesus until the 8th decade of the Common Era. Thus for anyone in the church to speak of the Bible as the “Word of God” becomes irrational. One surely does not want to blame God for all of the things in the Bible. For me, these statements are so mundane, so commonplace in the field of academic biblical studies that they are not even debatable. The fact is, however, that to my audience that night, they had never heard a representative of the Christian Church say these things. My talk received a standing ovation and elicited a number of questions to which I was given the privilege of responding. After that address, there was a lively sale of my books.

I am sure that Professor Diamond’s address was far more tailored to this group’s expectations than was mine. I, nonetheless, found his address absolutely fascinating. He spoke on the two reasons that, in his mind, belief in God no longer made sense. The first of his reasons came from the field of evolutionary biology. Human beings are “developed animals,” he said, not a special creation. He illustrated compassion and justice in society that with the discoveries of genetics and with the fact that all of us today carry some of the genes of Neanderthal people in our makeup. The idea that there is something unique, godlike or eternal about human life has, he suggested, no basis in science. The second reason, which in his mind destroyed the possibility of one being able to believe in God, came from the field of astrophysics. In the vastness of the universe, inhabited by perhaps as many as a trillion galaxies, the evolutionary probability is that intelligent life exists in many more places than just on planet Earth. This means, Dr. Diamond suggested, that life is a product of nature and that God is little more than a human myth.

I am not unfamiliar with either the field of evolutionary biology or astrophysics. I have read extensively in both areas. He told me nothing about which I was not already familiar. What did surprise me about Dr. Diamond’s address, however, was that the God he believed to have been destroyed by these two areas of exploding human knowledge is a deity in whom I too have not believed in for decades. This brilliant man was still operating out of a concept of God that represented what I would call a 4th grade Sunday school mentality. How could he be so learned in one field, and so limited in another? The answer to me is quite clear. The Christian Church, in its institutional form, makes little or no effort to educate its people theologically. Adult education in most churches is naive, juvenile and easily forgettable. It does not address the great issues of our day for fear of being controversial. It does not reflect the knowledge available in the Christian academies, keeping that knowledge secret from most congregations. It does not free the Christian faith to engage the knowledge revolution that is rampant in our generation. How can one in a post-Darwinian world, for example, still talk about human life being created perfect only to fall into original sin? [The Christian Church in almost all of its forms continues to protect from challenge, the childish fantasies of most churchgoers.](#) We would rather have our members quiet and placid rather than stirred up and questioning.

*Extract from the address by J S Spong*

*ProgressiveChristianity.org*

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## PCNV tries a new approach in meetings

As part of the process planning for programs in 2017, the Committee of PCNV reviewed the point we have reached after 11 years as a network encouraging awareness of progressive Christianity. We were in general agreement that the progressive movement represented by PCNV has:

- **moved beyond deconstruction** (at least in the sense that we do not want to continue simply going beyond the surface meaning of traditional theology or Bible or liturgy in our meetings); and
- **identified a growing interest in implications** of what has been deconstructed for our lives. This is sometimes gathered up in the concept of ‘spirituality’ or in the emphasis by Diana Butler Bass on ‘horizontal relationships’.

It seemed appropriate, therefore, to offer a series of meetings that focussed on helping people explore the practical implications of progressive Christian understandings – for everyday living, for disasters and tough times, and for compassion and justice in society. ‘Progressive Christian understandings’ is always plural because there is no one understanding that is definitively ‘progressive’, and ‘practical implications’ will vary from person to person depending on life situation. The program will be as much about processes as it is about content. The result of this planning is described on the last page of this newsletter.

**They Cannot Take the Sky. Edited by Michael Green, Andre Dao, Angelica Neville, Dave Affleck and Sienna Merope. Foreword by Christos Tsiolkas. Published by Allen & Unwin, March 2017. 336 pages. RRP \$29.99**

35 refuge-seeking detainees tell the stories of their desperate search for asylum and their heart wrenching experiences in detention on Manus Island, Nauru, Christmas Island or on mainland Australia.

The publisher describes the book as ‘revealing, moving and confronting accounts of the reality of life in mandatory detention by those who’ve experienced it.

‘For more than two decades, Australia has locked up people who arrive here fleeing persecution - sometimes briefly, sometimes for years. In *They Cannot Take the Sky* those people tell their stories, in their own words. Speaking from inside immigration detention on Manus Island and Nauru, or from within the Australian community after their release, the narrators reveal not only their extraordinary journeys and their daily struggles but also their meditations on love, death, hope and injustice. **Their candid testimonies are at times shocking and hilarious, surprising and devastating. They are witnesses from the edge of human experience.**’

The book has been created by Behind the Wire, an oral history project documenting the stories of men, women and children who have sought asylum in Australia and who have experienced mandatory detention by the Australian government.

The first-person narratives in *They Cannot Take the Sky* range from epic life stories to heartbreaking vignettes. The narrators who have shared their stories have done so despite the culture of silence surrounding immigration detention, and the real risks faced by those who speak out. Once you have heard their voices, you will never forget them.

Alexis Wright wrote: “These stories of perilous journeys from dangerous homelands to rightfully and justly seek asylum in Australia, and our rejection and brutal treatment of refugees ... will be remembered in the history of the world as being among the most important stories of rejection of those in most desperate need of our protection. These are stories you will read and never forget. All Australians must read this book...”

“This is a book whose human, frank, illuminating voices the government does not want to hear from.” Tom Keneally

You can hear a person in detention on Manus speak about how he sees the sky in a brief youtube clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l59Yni7DXYg>

or on the publisher’s website:

<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/general-books/current-affairs-politics/They-Cannot-Take-the-Sky>

*“The sky is like a friend for a prisoner*

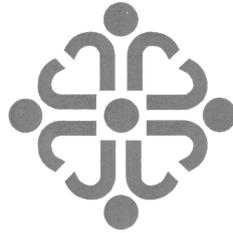
*Because around you is only metal, metal fences*

*But the sky -*

*They cannot take the sky”*

Review by John Boatman and David Merritt

**Have you ever wondered what practical difference to your life  
all the scholarly discussions of progressive Christianity actually make?  
What are the practical implications of progressive Christianity  
for the realities of everyday life or tough times or a better world?**



The Progressive Christian Network of Victoria invites you to a series of programs that go beyond the scholarship we have heard a lot about to explore implications for our lives.

On four successive programs, each on a core Christian topic, a team of leaders will remind us briefly about the perspective of traditional Christianity then focus on two progressive Christian perspectives:

On APRIL 23: GOD

On MAY 28: JESUS

On JUNE 25: THE BIBLE

On JULY 23: HOPE

Because there is no one perspective that represents progressive Christianity, and we are certainly not expecting agreement on implications, on each topic the team will present **two perspectives defined by the writings of four well-known but very different progressive Christians:**

1. Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong
2. Lloyd Geering and Gretta Vosper

In brief presentations and handout notes the team will stimulate you to **think about possible implications**

- for your everyday life
- for disasters and tough times
- for compassion and justice in society

**In addition to presentations and notes, a variety of processes will give you time in small groups and then for individual reflection to identify and write some implications that matter to you.** Some of these will be displayed to provide a wide range of possible implications for our lives. If you volunteer an email address, the team will send you within two weeks a collation of all the listed implications - a treasure trove for further reflection. Bring a pen!

*Leadership team: Adrian Pyle, Lorna Henry, David Merritt  
PCNV meeting cost is \$7 (\$5 for members)*